

The *Meteor*: The “Remarkable Enterprise” at the Alabama Insane Hospital, 1872–1881

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BETWEEN 1872 AND THE EARLY 1880s, patients at the Alabama Insane Hospital (AIH) wrote, edited, and published the *Meteor*, an informative, entertaining, and quality newspaper. Dr. Peter Bryce, superintendent of the AIH from 1861 to 1892, boasted of the *Meteor* as his institution’s “remarkable enterprise.”¹ Although many individuals praised the paper, British psychologist Dr. W. Lauder Lindsay wrote in the *Excelsior*, “Though the *Meteor* purports to be edited by a patient, it is evident that the Physician Superintendent is the responsible and real editor.” The *Meteor* editor responded that although Lindsay “thinks the *Meteor* wires are worked by some one who is not insane,” the superintendent would not accept responsibility. Instead, he argued that “as in the United States we have a troop of the craziest sane folks the world ever knew, so also we can boast some of the sanest crazy ones”² and that the latter were responsible for the paper. The “sanest crazy” folk did conduct a “remarkable enterprise,”

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¹ *Annual Report of the Alabama Insane Hospital at Tusculooosa* (Montgomery, 1872), 51. In 1873 the editors of the *American Journal of Insanity* noted that the *Meteor* was only the third paper edited and printed by patients in an insane asylum in the United States. The editors “welcome[d] this new effort and wish[ed] for it a long continued and useful existence.” See *American Journal of Insanity* 29 (January 1873): 451.

² *Meteor*, March 30, 1874. The *Excelsior* was published by the Royal Murray Asylum at Perth, Scotland.

and their efforts provide an atypical window into a nineteenth-century mental health hospital. When understood in the context of changes in nineteenth-century mental health treatment and the work of Bryce, the *Meteor* provides an example of changing methods of treating the mentally ill and of life in an Alabama mental hospital.

The state of Alabama established the AIH, now Bryce Hospital, in 1852 at Tuscaloosa, and the hospital admitted its first patient in 1861.³ The founding of the hospital was a long, difficult task, and the first years of operation were perilous ones. In 1861 buildings and facilities were incomplete; strains of the Civil War and Reconstruction only added to the burgeoning problems of finishing and operating a mental hospital. Although rising financial costs and an increasing number of patients almost forced the institution to close, hard work, perseverance, and sacrifice enabled it to survive.

By providing intelligent management and tenacious leadership, Bryce played the key role in shaping the AIH.⁴ He

³ For a history of the establishment of the AIH see Bill L. Weaver, "Establishing and Organizing the Alabama Insane Hospital, 1846–1861," *Alabama Review* 48 (July 1995): 219–32; for a review of the development of psychiatry in Alabama see Frank A. Kay, "Historical Background of Alabama Psychiatry," parts 1 and 2, *De Historia Medicinæ: Official Publication of the Alabama Society of Medical History* 5 (April 1961): 5–12, and (August 1961): 3–10; Katherine Vickery, *A History of Mental Health in Alabama* ([Montgomery], [1972?]), 13–45; and S. D. Allen, *A Short History of the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Personal Reminiscences* ([Montgomery], [1977?]). For a statistical assessment of AIH patients see Bill L. Weaver, "An Analysis of the Patient Population at the Alabama Insane Hospital, 1861–1892," *Alabama Review* 51 (January 1998): 37–51. For information on the design and construction of the hospital see Robert O. Mellow, "The Construction of the Alabama Insane Hospital, 1852–1861," *Alabama Review* 38 (April 1985): 83–104. Also see John S. Hughes, "Labeling and Treating Black Mental Illness in Alabama, 1861–1890," *Journal of Southern History* 58 (August 1992): 435–60; John S. Hughes, "The Madness of Separate Spheres: Insanity and Masculinity in Victorian Alabama," in *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*, ed. Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffin (Chicago, 1990), 53–66; John S. Hughes, "'Country Boys Make the Best Nurses': Nursing the Insane in Alabama, 1861–1910," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 49 (January 1994): 79–106; Robert O. Mellow, "Mental Health and Moral Architecture," *Alabama Heritage* (Spring 1994): 5–17; John S. Hughes, "Insights into an Insane Asylum," *Alabama Heritage* (Spring 1994): 18–27; and Elizabeth H. Rand, "A Modern Analysis," *Alabama Heritage* (Spring 1994): 28–29.

⁴ Bill L. Weaver, "Survival at the Alabama Insane Hospital, 1861–1892," *Journal of the History*

gained a national reputation for himself and the hospital by implementing new practices. Along with other reform-minded medical specialists in the Western world, Bryce worked to dispel myths surrounding insanity. Traditionally, insanity was believed to be caused by demons or spirits, and the general public thought patients in insane hospitals were mistreated or neglected. Bryce maintained that "insanity is the result, in every case, of a diseased condition of the brain."⁵ Because the brain was an organ, mental illness should be treated as a physical disorder. A careful distinction, however, was made between the insane, the lunatic (those suffering from mental defects and not susceptible to treatment), and the criminally insane. Although this explanation of insanity appears simple or even backward in light of modern means of diagnosis and treatment, it represented an important step forward in the nineteenth century and the beginning of psychiatry as a medical science.⁶

Bryce practiced the new theories on treating insanity at the AIH. Although he never succinctly articulated a comprehensive plan of administration, Bryce, by his second decade of leadership, had clearly adopted three important goals: to use occupational therapy to treat patients, to educate the public about mental illness and mental health institutions, and to use public relations material to convince state leaders to appropriate more money for mental health programs. Each of these contributed to the success of the AIH, and it is within the context of these three goals that the *Meteor* provides insight into the reform movement.

Bryce and other medical specialists described their prac-

of Medicine and Allied Sciences 51 (January 1996): 5-28. This article addresses the leadership and management strategies of Bryce and the financial problems of the AIH in its early years. Also see Matthew W. Clinton, "Dr. Peter and the Alabama Insane Hospital," in *Annual Labor Day Program* ([Tuscaloosa], 1961), 17-50.

⁵ *Annual Report of the AIH* (1872), 36; (1870), 9-10.

⁶ For Bryce's views on the nature, causes, prevention, and treatment of insanity see *Annual Report of the AIH* (1878), 12-33.

tices as scientific treatment of insanity.⁷ Often referred to as moral treatment, scientific treatment aimed at providing quality and sensitive care to patients within a controlled setting. Rejecting traditional methods of using drugs and restraints—such as straight jackets, crib beds, bed straps, or even dungeons and chains—for controlling patients, moral treatment involved an orderly regimen in a structured environment in an asylum run by an attentive and kind—but firm and demanding—staff. “[J]udicious medication, systematic kindness and undeviating candor”⁸ were used; recreation, amusements, worship services, and patient labor became distinguishing elements in treatment. Moral treatment programs strongly encouraged recreation and reading and provided a variety of amusements considered “as essential as medicine,”⁹ including billiards, table games, croquet, strolls in the gardens or woods, boat rides, musical and theatrical entertainment, afternoon teas, and dances. The AIH established a library—named in 1874 after its main benefactor John S. Pierson—and its books, periodicals, and newspapers offered the chief source of enjoyment for many patients. Local newspapers that kept patients informed of the news from home were especially popular on the wards,¹⁰ and ministers regularly conducted religious services. Bryce maintained that each of these activities provided a key component in treating the diseased mind.

⁷ For a review of the treatment of the mentally ill in the United States see Gerald N. Grob, *The Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill* (New York, 1994); Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Illness and American Society, 1875–1940* (Princeton, 1983); Leland V. Bell, *Treating the Mentally Ill: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 1980). For detailed information on moral treatment and its development and demise see Gerald N. Grob, *The State and the Mentally Ill: A History of Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts, 1830–1920* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1966) and J. Sanbourne Bockoven, *Moral Treatment in American Psychiatry* (New York, 1963).

⁸ *Annual Report of the AIH* (1870), 10.

⁹ *Annual Report of the Alabama Insane Hospital* ([Tuscaloosa, 1875]), [21], advance copy of the superintendent's annual report printed by *Meteor* press. Copy in W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama.

¹⁰ *Annual Report of the AIH* (1876), 34–35.

Additionally, all able-bodied individuals were required to engage in physical labor at the AIH. Labeled occupational therapy, this activity was unlike twentieth-century occupational therapy and involved putting patients to work in various occupations—usually either a trade, activity, or craft they already knew or a menial task—to keep them busy, thereby helping to heal mental disorders. Bryce maintained that “[a]s a remedial agent judicious employment is of the very first importance.”¹¹ Men engaged in farming, gardening, landscaping, cooking, or working in the stables, apiaries, henries, coal mines, lumber mills, or mattress, tailor, carpenter, shoe, and blacksmith shops; women kept busy with spinning, sewing, knitting, gardening, landscaping, cooking, ironing, housework, or doing laundry. Some patients who were unable or unwilling to work engaged in artistic endeavors such as “drawing, painting, or the fabrication of useless articles of dress or ornamentation.”¹² Bryce claimed that “[n]othing contributes so much to the general satisfaction, easy management, rest at night and the mental improvement of the patients as out-door employment.”¹³ Thus, occupational therapy involved creating a setting for patients similar to that which existed outside the hospital, helping patients prepare for their lives and vocations after release from the hospital and keeping them busy and manageable in the meantime. Bryce’s efforts succeeded. By the 1880s the AIH had abandoned the use of restraints and drugs except in rare cases, and the hospital had many patients returning to useful lives and occupations.¹⁴

¹¹ *Annual Report of the AIH* (1878), 47.

¹² *Annual Report of the AIH* (1872), 49–50; *Annual Report of the AIH* (1878), 9; *Biennial Report of the Alabama Insane Hospital at Tuscaloosa* (Montgomery, 1882), 18. Although the percentages would vary, Bryce estimated in 1880 that 70 percent of the males and 86 percent of the females engaged in useful occupations. See *Annual Report of the AIH* (1880), 23.

¹³ *Biennial Report of the Alabama Bryce Insane Hospital at Tuscaloosa* (Tuscaloosa, 1900), 11.

¹⁴ *Biennial Report of the Alabama Bryce Insane Hospital at Tuscaloosa* (Montgomery, 1886), 24; Vickery, *Mental Health in Alabama*, 63; Kay, “Alabama Psychiatry,” part 1, p. 11.

Patient labor provided another significant benefit beyond its therapeutic value, one that certainly encouraged administrators to adopt the use of occupational therapy. Proceeds from the labor went to the hospital, and this practice was a primary reason that many mental institutions survived in the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Funding from the state and counties was always precarious. The hospital's farms and shops produced much of the food and resources used at the institution; female patients produced nearly all of the clothes, sheets, and household items; and patients in the hospital facilities did all the laundry. Patients even helped repair or build several facilities; in some cases patients made bricks for hospital construction projects.¹⁶ Bryce stressed both the therapeutic and the economic benefits of occupational therapy. Which was more important was not the issue; the financial and therapeutic dimensions represented two sides of the same coin.

Because the hospital aimed at self-sufficiency, all occupational skills were needed—including printing. Several printers were admitted to the institution in the 1860s and 1870s.¹⁷ Then in the early 1870s the hospital admitted a highly educated, talented man who would play the key role in starting, producing, and editing the *Meteor*. By his own description, he “possesse[d] the singular faculty of being crazy or not as the humor seizes . . . [and] is manifestly a very *considerate* gentleman; is a real personage and not a myth, as some incredulous persons suppose.”¹⁸ With this talented individual admitted to the hospital and several printers already at the hospital, Bryce concluded that a print shop should be established. A handpress was already in use to produce a few items

¹⁵ Weaver, “Survival at the Alabama Insane Hospital,” 5–28.

¹⁶ *Annual Report of the AIIH* (1872), 44–47; *Annual Report of the AIIH* (1880), 21.

¹⁷ *Annual Report of the AIIH* (1872), 15.

¹⁸ *Meteor*, December 25, 1873. The same individual served as the editor of the *Meteor* from 1872 through 1881. To preserve patient confidentiality, the editor's name did not appear in the *Meteor*, and despite several inquiries the author was unable to establish independently the editor's identity.

for the hospital's needs, such as advance copies of the annual reports for the state legislators. Although these hospital publications remained the staple of AIH printing activities, the *Meteor* quickly gained the limelight.

In 1872 the hospital purchased a printing press, type, and paper for \$254.35¹⁹ and placed the press in one of a row of rooms that adjoined the main hospital building, part of a series of work areas. When work in the print shop began, the patient operating the shoe shop insisted that the editor name the row of rooms. "Crazy Row, Insane Court, Demented Block, Epileptic Hall, . . . Imaginary-ill Building" and other names were rejected. Finally, Innocent Row was adopted because "the term innocent, used in some countries to denominate idiots, was in all employed to characterise children." Therefore, innocent would be "a most appropriate designation; for between insane persons and children there are many points of resemblance. Both are not unfrequently whimsical, passionate, having little self-control, and while but little amenable to pure reason, wonderfully susceptible to the influence of kindness and a mild, firm discipline."²⁰

The title "Meteor" was selected because "Meteors are always a surprise"; they "appear at irregular intervals" and have short but brilliant careers. The paper operated for "the benefit of the patients" and "to give patrons of the institution an insight into some details of its practical operations." Although the editor performed the main work on the *Meteor*, several other patients helped him with typesetting and production. Patients produced nearly every word of copy except for a few short articles on hospital policy, and Bryce played only a limited supervisory role.²¹ If nonpatient articles were printed, they were acknowledged as such. The pa-

¹⁹ "Steward's Account" in *Annual Report of the AIH* (1872), 8.

²⁰ *Meteor*, July 4, 1872.

²¹ *Ibid.*; *Annual Report of the AIH* ([1875]), [24–25], W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library; *Annual Report of the AIH* (1874), 16.

per's masthead contained the Latin phrase "Lucus a non lucendo," roughly translated a grove (particularly a place associated with poetry or literary creativity) that is away from the light (particularly away from being famous, or meaning a place that is obscure). Based on the content of the paper, the phrase implied that the *Meteor* was produced in a grove or pastoral setting where one would not normally expect to find literary creativity.

The *Meteor*, originally a quarterly publication, provides a wealth of information on life at the AIH.²² Discussions on recreation, reading and debating clubs, worship services, constructions, renovations, entertainment, activities, holiday festivities, life on the wards, farm production, and strolls through the orchards, gardens, and woodlands appear throughout. Lighthearted humor found its way into articles on social events, patient-produced plays, and biographical sketches of administrators, patients, and the editor. Satirical want ads sometimes appeared. One solicited a wife for a certain official at the hospital, and another individual wanted a "more quiet and private" apartment because his neighbor "gets very pious with the advent of night, and keeps him awake by a long succession of badly intoned hymns."²³ Poems and articles by patients were included, and the columns entitled "Brevities" and "Meteoric Dust" contained personal and institutional news about patients and activities, donations, and hospital groups. Even typical household mishaps on the wards served as grist for the humor mill, as illustrated in the following communication to the paper:

Oh, it was awful! That never to be forgotten night! As we were quietly pondering the trials and troubles of life we were aroused from our rev-

²² The *Meteor* published approximately twenty-one issues. The last issue the author found was printed in December 1881. The best collection of the issues is found at the Alabama Department of Archives and History. The Bryce Hospital Staff Library in Tuscaloosa also has numerous issues of the *Meteor*.

²³ *Meteor*, July 4, 1872.

erie by a terrible shriek for help from the ward adjoining. We rushed in that direction and found our excited friend in a terrible state of agitation but armed and equipped for assault with intent to kill. "A huge wild animal in the dining room!" What were we to do? We got a lantern, moved very warily to the door of the room, opened it cautiously and let the light gently penetrate it, so as to reveal without disturbing the ferocious foe. Sure enough there he was and reared upon his hind legs ready for battle. We rushed toward him and for a length of time the storm of battle raged. Sad havoc was made of the furniture of the room, for every chair and table confederated with the enemy and always stood exactly where we would be sure to run against or over them. But in the end victory perched on the banners of two brave girls as they proudly surveyed the prostrate form of the dying—rat.²⁴

Although information on life and work at the AIH served to enlighten readers about operations of a mental hospital and to dispel myths about insanity, the *Meteor* also played another public relations role. After reading about life at the AIH, readers learned of the financial needs of the hospital. Donations were requested and acknowledged. Pleas for a "Piano for our new Amusement Hall" were made along with requests for smaller gifts. "Books, Newspapers, Engravings, Musical Instruments, Games of all kinds, etc. etc. are always acceptable," the paper advised, "and contributors may feel assured, however insignificant such donations may seem, that they fulfill one of the noblest ends of moral actions, the promotion of human happiness."²⁵

The public relations function of the paper went beyond educating the public and requesting donations. Open letters to the governor and state officials frequently appeared. Some "To the Legislature" articles presented emotional requests for greater assistance for the AIH. "The insane have been rightly styled 'the most unfortunate class of the whole community,'" the article emphasized. "Forced from home, torn from relations, banned by the public voice; upon the

²⁴ Ibid., December 25, 1879.

²⁵ Ibid., July 4, 1872.

wise counsels and generous hearts of the law-makers of their country do they depend for all that makes life desirable, yea, even for life itself." Therefore, the editor urged the legislators not to forget the insane and to remember that "you may soon find it necessary to invoke for some friend or relative, . . . member of your immediate family . . . even some of yourselves" the protection of an insane hospital. Other articles contained more forceful requests for "Charity for the care and treatment of the insane" by appealing to the obligations of the state or Christian duty. The *Meteor* press also printed the superintendent's annual reports—prior to their publication by state printers—to distribute to members of the state house and senate at the beginning of the legislative session. These reports had a public relations benefit; the *Florence Journal* acknowledged receipt of the report and stated that the AIH is "a monument that reflects infinite credit upon Alabama."²⁶

The variety and breadth of the issues addressed in the *Meteor* were enlightening and educational. Some articles were summaries of reading material in the hospital's library, and many pieces reflected the writing style and knowledge of the editor rather than that of the average patient. Nevertheless, the paper contained an impressive array of topics. Articles on new treatments and theories of insanity, alcoholism, and cerebral pathology appeared next to essays on love, women, theology, integrity, and occupational therapy. Articles on insanity reflected the current trend of classifying the condition as a physical disorder of the brain best remedied with moral treatment. But there were criticisms as well; two suggestions included paying patients who did physical labor and introducing new types of amusements.²⁷

Philosophical and current issues were among the topics

²⁶ Ibid., October 1, 1872, December 25, 1873; *Florence Journal*, April 14, 1870. For an example of an advance annual report printed by the *Meteor* press, see n. 9 above.

²⁷ *Meteor*, October 1, 1872.

addressed. One issue, for example, included a discussion of Darwinism because it was "the scientific issue of the day." After brief remarks on the debate, the editor offered his views of modern science:

One thing we admire in Modern Science—the fearlessness with which it pushes its explorations, never halting to say to Peter, Paul or Moses, "may we?" but casting all authority aside, interrogates fearlessly the mind of God as engraven upon the works of His hand.

One thing in Modern Science we dislike—a disposition to imagine that every new fact evoked is a death knell of Christianity. If Christianity survived the discovery of the rotundity of the Earth, its revolution around the Sun, and the proof that Creation was a gradual process occupying myriads of years, it will certainly survive all Darwinian and other theories of natural phenomena however ingenious, and however decided.²⁸

The editor and patients also possessed a sense of humor, especially when it came to the issue of insanity. When the Alabama Press Association visited the hospital in May 1874, the editor embellished the story of the visit. "The Hospital was jogging along in its usual quiet way on Thursday morning," the article began, when a terror-stricken messenger burst into the superintendent's office, handed Bryce a note, and then fainted from exhaustion. The note read: "Have the Insane Hospital made ready for the Press Convention." Bryce was in shock; his first reaction "was to telegraph in reply that the Hospital being already nearly full, there was not room for so many, and that chronic cases could not be received." But the AIH survived the "deluge" of visitors, and the guests were "conducted through the Hospital and over its grounds—to the vegetable and flower-gardens, to the Meteor office, the apiaries, the Barn and the Laundry and finally to the Amusement-Hall."²⁹ In addition to providing the *Meteor* editor with grist for his humor mill, the visit had a public relations benefit. In articles on the Press Associa-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, July 4, 1872.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, July 1874.

tion's visit to Tuscaloosa, newspapers across Alabama praised Bryce's leadership and management style and the neatness and orderliness of the AIH. The *Union Springs Herald* noted that some of the patients were "ladies and gentlemen of education and refinement" and concluded that this "home is an honor to our state." The *Greenville Advocate* maintained that the AIH "is kept in a most excellent condition. Dr. Bryce . . . is indeed the right man in the right place."³⁰

Another *Meteor* article, entitled "Magnetism," characterized the hospital and the University of Alabama as "the two Poles of the great intellectual Magnet of the State." University students and hospital patients, the article continued, were a mirror image of each other: "The inmates of the University come to acquire ideas. We to get rid of them. They receive encomiums for proficiency in military tactics. The slightest proclivities in that direction, at our house, insure rebuke. If a student is insubordinate or irregular in his deportment, he is sent home. The more obstreperous our behavior, the closer we are held."³¹

The editor used self-effacing humor to inject snippets of personal information about his pet, visits from his daughter, and his life on Innocent Row. When asked why he was kept at the hospital, the editor responded with admirable acumen: "He is a great admirer of the ladies and if he were free might marry some poor girl and have to work so hard as to endanger his health. . . . He might want to preach, but agreeing with none of the churches might fail to get a call. . . . He might wish to edit a paper, but as he is neither a Democrat nor a Republican he might lack support."³²

The *Meteor* never suffered from a lack of support at the hospital. The paper served patients well, and it was a useful

³⁰ *Union Springs Herald*, May 27, 1874; *Greenville Advocate*, May 28, 1874; the *Tuscaloosa Blade*, June 11, 18, and 25, 1874; *Annual Report of the AIH* (1880), 25.

³¹ *Meteor*, July 4, 1872.

³² *Ibid.*, December 25, 1879.

tool for educating patrons of the hospital and state officials on the institution's needs and activities. Bryce frequently praised the paper as "no less a pleasure to its contributors and readers among the patients, than it is a literary curiosity to the public." Bryce claimed that the *Meteor*'s articles exhibited "*from the patients' standpoint*, all the various departments and operations of the institution. [The *Meteor*] serves in this way, to bring . . . before the friends and patrons of the Hospital, in a manner hardly compatible with the dignity of an official Annual Report to the Legislature, the trivial incidents and delineations of every-day hospital life."³³ Patrons of the AIH and various newspapers also praised the paper. The *Tuscaloosa Times* claimed the *Meteor* was a "wonderful specimen of newspaper literature" and pronounced it "a saner specimen of journalism than many newspapers published outside of the walls of an Asylum."³⁴

The editor and other patients worked on Innocent Row for four years before their enthusiasm began to wane. Between 1876 and 1877 a subtle change appeared in the newspaper. In April 1876 the *Meteor* reiterated that it sought "to keep the Press and people of Alabama, especially the patrons of the hospital, *en rapport* with the doings of the institution, and well abreast with the most advanced views in the care and treatment of the insane." But in the next issue, July 1876, the paper announced a change in purpose: "The *Meteor* will be printed in future solely for the use of the patients of the hospital. If a copy [should] fall into the hands of persons not attached to the institution, they may discover if they have an equitable right to read it, by asking themselves the following query: 'Have I a thoroughly sound and well-balanced mind, free from quips and cranks of every kind?' If yes, return the paper to the Hospital, as an estray."³⁵ Nev-

³³ *Annual Report of the AIH* (1872), 51.

³⁴ *Tuscaloosa Times*, April 8, 1874.

³⁵ *Meteor*, April 1876, July 1876.

ertheless, later issues reiterated that the paper still sought to inform the friends, patrons, state newspaper editors, and state legislators about life at the hospital, and articles were addressed to these audiences. Clearly, the *Meteor* was undergoing changes, primarily related to the attitude and experiences of the editor. For example, in 1877, after five years of publication, the *Meteor* failed to make its quarterly appearance; the editor explained that he was “disgusted with the long succession of years that still found him at the Hospital, determined to strike a halt in the regular issue, and to print a number only when inclined to do so.”³⁶ Issues began appearing infrequently; usually only a Christmas edition was published. Departing from previous practices, the editor even required help from one of the nurses to publish the December 1879 issue. The *Meteor* remained informative, but it lacked its earlier flair and entertainment value. Humor still appeared in its pages, but a bitterness and frustration showed through. Even jokes had a slightly caustic tone. When asked if science has done away with hell, the editor replied: “No: it has only reduced its temperature—from that of molten granite to that of boiling water. Theologians, however, expect when Bob Ingersoll departs this life that the old temperature will be regained.”³⁷

In the early 1880s the *Meteor* ceased publication. The “remarkable enterprise” lasted but a decade, but it represents more than a brief experiment of patients producing a newspaper. First, the *Meteor* provides a fascinating window into a mental hospital in the nineteenth century. Discussions of life at the hospital can be found in official reports and documents, but the columns of the paper supplement these records by providing the patients’ perspectives. Second, as an example of occupational therapy the *Meteor* served the goal

³⁶ Ibid., December 24, 1881.

³⁷ Ibid. Robert (Bob) Green Ingersoll was a nineteenth-century religious skeptic viewed by many as an infidel.

of "treating insanity" and of helping the AIH financially. Third, the paper educated the public and state leaders. Newspapers around the state commented on the *Meteor*, and their readers learned of the nature and operation of the hospital and that patients had the mental ability to write, edit, and print a newspaper. Finally, the *Meteor* stands as an example of the accomplishments of Bryce. Although Alabama ranked among the lowest states in the nation in terms of financial support for mental hospitals during the Bryce years,³⁸ the AIH survived the nineteenth century and provided remarkable mental health care services despite adverse conditions. The use of occupational therapy, educational techniques, and public relations efforts enabled the AIH to survive and gain national recognition, and the *Meteor* contributed in each of these areas.

Few newspapers have been as aptly named as the *Meteor*. It enjoyed a short but brilliant career and appeared at irregular intervals. Patients and patrons of the hospital benefited from its publication, and it provides insight into life in a nineteenth-century mental hospital and the reform movement that made it possible. The perspective of the paper no doubt portrays the AIH in the best light, although institutional warts are not always removed. The slightly biased view does not diminish the value or achievements of the *Meteor*. Patients cared enough to write, edit, and publish a paper, and their pride certainly influenced the publication. Patient pride and satisfaction in the paper may have been the most important contribution. As an unidentified superintendent from another mental hospital wrote in 1873: "Many a more pretentious sheet would be vastly improved if it had half the dash, sense and ability of your modest little Meteor. May it long flash light and joy into the beclouded hearts and minds of those who find their best homes and friends in the Hospi-

³⁸ Weaver, "Survival at the Alabama Insane Hospital," 5-28; *Annual Report of the AIH* (1873), 14-15; Vickery, *Mental Health in Alabama*, 43, 89-92.

tals for the insane.”³⁹ The *Meteor* did not “flash light and joy” for long, but it stands as a “remarkable enterprise” by creative patients with “beclouded hearts and minds” and as a testimonial to the patients and their human spirit in an age that often viewed the mentally ill as slightly less than human.

³⁹ *Meteor*, December 25, 1873.